

[Resources](#) ▾[Leading Ideas](#) ▾[Stewardship](#) ▾[Reaching Others](#) ▾[Pastoral Excellence](#) ▾[Learning](#) ▾[About](#) ▾[You Are At:](#) [Home](#) » [Leading Ideas](#) » [A Better Script for Small Churches](#)

# Leading Ideas



## | A Better Script for Small Churches

By Lewis A. Parks On May 26, 2010

Leading Ideas

Share:



I have served as pastor of small, mid-size, and large churches. And some of them grew, especially the larger ones. Large churches that grow larger are exciting to serve and provide great stories of success. But 75 percent of churches in the United States and 95 percent in some countries are small and don't grow rapidly if at all. So what do we say about them? Are these small churches the unavoidable casualties of some invisible force at work: survival of fittest (Herbert Spencer), the invisible hand of free market economy (Adam Smith), or hold-outs from the march of progress — Luddites in an age of Blackberries and hybrid cars?

“ *The drama of a small church is not the drama of growth goals hit or missed, but the drama of endurance — of keeping the faith against incredible odds over extended periods of time.*

I have looked everywhere for better scripts for small churches than such fatalisms. What about a small family business that has no intention of making the Fortune 500 list, but thrives on direct communication, focused product, hands-on leadership, quick adaptability, and loyal workers, while it strives toward the goal of being passed on to the next generation at about the same size?

What about British anthropologist Robin Dunbar's number theory? This theory posits that the optimum social group size among humans (determined by the size of the neocortex section of the brain) is 100 to 150. That's the number of persons with whom one can have stable, intimate relations. It is the best size for communication, for sympathy, for loyalty, for mutual help and trust, and, therefore, the best size for a

Subscribe for

Every Wednesday. Leading Ideas and strategies for church leaders.

E-Mail

| Search

Search ...



| The Right Question

**Leaders do not need  
Leaders must have**

Trevor Dancer, pastor  
in Kansas City, Missouri  
question in a sermon

*If people knew how much  
to give more themselves*

Want more *Right Question  
Leaders*.

military company, a village, a nomadic tribe, a social networking website, or an office. And of course, as validated repeatedly in history, if it is not the best size for a congregation, it is at least a very common size.

What about Pfoutz Valley Church? This little church sits at the end of the slate Township Road 549 and has had about 90 members in four generations for at least 150 of the 200 years of its existence. It has been true to its theological identity and has been creatively adapting to changes in its environment. Is that a 150-year-old script of never quite taking off as it should have? Of not being all it could be? Really? Can't we imagine a better interpretation than that?

I use the phrase “dynamic equilibrium” to describe a better script for many small churches. A church in such healthy equilibrium:

- Is multi-generational because the faith is not just for the present generation (Gen 15:5-6; 2 Tim 1:5)
- Applies the church’s own metrics of vitality and faithfulness, such as its capacity to hold diverse persons in a unity of purpose (“the church is one”)
- Cherishes its corporate story but wants to write a new chapter
- Creatively adapts to changes in its environment rather than closing itself off from change
- Grows in members and stewardship at a pace that offsets losses and increased demands

The drama of a small church is not the drama of growth goals hit or missed, but the drama of endurance — of keeping the faith against incredible odds over extended periods of time.

In addition to my teaching, these days I am a pastoral leader trying to help Arnold’s Church in Dillsburg, Pennsylvania, find its proper script. We have a rich history. Sometimes we pull a nugget from our history to lift our spirits. But what we most want to figure out is what story are we in now? What plot are we trying to advance? Is the next faithful step in this direction or that direction? I think all of us agree that the pressing work of our life together comes down to our mutual commitment to a few basic acts: Show up. Accept the part that is given you. Play it hard. Don't look down or back too long. It is drama enough for us.

Small Membership Churches

Share.        

About Author

Lewis A. Parks

Dr. Lew Parks has served churches of all sizes as a United Methodist pastor and superintendent. As he continues to direct the Doctor of Ministry program at Wesley Theological Seminary and teach, he is pastor of Calvary United Methodist Church in Lemoyne, Pennsylvania. He also assists denominational leaders around vitality in small membership churches and is author of *Preaching in the Small Membership Church* (Abingdon Press, 2009) and *Small on Purpose: Life in a Significant Church* (Abingdon Press, 2017) [Cokesbury | Amazon].

Related Posts

- March 7, 2018

| What is Your Signature Ministry?
- February 7, 2018

| Closing a Congregation as an Act of Faithfulness
- October 4, 2017

| Leadership and the Small Membership Church

Adult Education Studies from the Wesley Ministry Network

The Wesley Ministry Network brings the best of contemporary Christian scholarship to your congregation’s small groups and adult Bible studies. These video-based group study courses encourage the energetic discussion and personal reflection that are keys to a life of informed

| Quotable Leadership

People rarely appreciate themselves inside friends and self-confirms are constantly reinforcing

Yuval Harari

| Most Popular Posts

February 1, 2018  
Developing a

March 7, 2018  
When Church

February 1, 2018  
16 Signs of  
on Discipleship

February 1, 2018  
Boring A  
Announcement

March 14, 2018  
7 Ways to  
the Right

| Most Popular Topics

Books

Change

Community Outreach

Congregational Formation

Evangelism

Faithfulness

Fruitfulness

Functional

Hospitality

Lay Leadership

Leadership Best Practices

Lessons for Leaders

Millennials

Mission

Pastoral Ministry

Planning and Visioning

Reach New

Serve Your Neighborhood

Stewardship

Ta

discipleship. Courses are designed for use in small groups in a wide range of denominations, but they are also appropriate for individuals seeking self-study opportunities. [Learn more now.](#)

**Ecumenical studies:** *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* | *Journey through the Psalms* | *Devotion to Jesus: The Divinity of Christ in Earliest Christianity* | *Serious Answers to Hard Questions* | *Religion and Science: Pathways to Truth* | *In God's Time* | *A Life Worthy of the Gospel* | *Women Speak of God*

**United Methodist studies:** *Methodist Identity — Part 1: Our Story; Part 2: Our Beliefs* | *Wesleyan Studies Project — Series I: Methodist History; Series II: Methodist Doctrine; Series III: Methodist Evangelism*

To the Point

Vision

V

Worship

Worship

| Video Tool Kits & Eboo

Optimizin  
\$75.00

Developi  
\$59.00

Theology  
\$59.00

<div>Connect</div> <div><div>Lewis Center for Church Leadership</div><div>Wesley Theological Seminary</div><div>New phone number (202) 664-5700</div><div>Fax (202) 885-8605</div><div>lewiscenter@wesleyseminary.edu</div><div>4500 Massachusetts Ave., NW</div><div>Washington, DC 20016</div></div>	<div>Resources</div> <div><div>Tool Kits</div><div>50 Ways</div><div>Leading Ideas Articles</div><div>Leading Ideas Talks Podcast</div><div>Books</div><div>To the Point Sheets</div><div>Free Videos</div><div>Online Learning</div><div>Research</div><div>Clergy Age Trends</div></div> <div>Leading Ideas</div> <div><div>Subscribe</div><div>Articles</div><div>Leading Ideas Talks Podcast</div><div>Authors</div><div>Topics</div><div>Reprint Info</div></div>	<div>Stewardship</div> <div><div>Giving and Generosity</div><div>Church Finances</div><div>Clergy Personal Finances</div></div> <div>Reaching Others</div> <div><div>Reach New Disciples</div><div>Serve Your Neighbor</div></div> <div>Pastoral Excellence</div> <div><div>LPLI-360 Evaluation</div><div>Preventing Misconduct</div><div>Pastoral Transitions</div><div>Young Clergy</div><div>Lewis Fellows</div><div>Clergy Mentoring</div><div>Clergy Evaluation</div><div>Clergy Personal Finances</div><div>Focus for Denominational Leaders</div><div>DS Resources</div><div>BOM Resources</div></div>	<div>Learning</div> <div><div>Leadership D.Mir</div><div>Online Learning</div><div>Lewis Fellows</div><div>Wesley Theologi</div><div>Lewis Communit</div></div> <div>About</div> <div><div>Staff</div><div>News</div></div> <div>Shop</div> <div><div>Adult Christian E</div><div>Stewardship Vide</div><div>Leadership Exce</div><div>Reach New Disci</div><div>PDF Ebooks</div></div> <div>Donate</div> <div><div>Lovett H. Weems</div></div>
--	--	---	---

© 2018 Lewis Center for Church Leadership of Wesley Theological Seminary